It is 63 years since Robert Schuman presented a proposal for the creation of a community of European Nation States – a community which would be bound together by shared values and concerns whilst accepting and embracing diversity.

This proposal, made on 9th May 1950, would lay the foundations for lasting peace and prosperity in Europe and would give all Europeans the democratic tools to ensure that Governments worked together in their interests.

Such is the importance of the Schuman Declaration and the European Project that 9th May has been designation as ‘Europe Day’ to acknowledge the peace and unity which has been accomplished but to also acknowledge that there is more to do.

It is for this very reason that this Government committed to a week long parliamentary debate on Europe and Ireland’s priorities within the EU and which is why I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to this committee in Europe Week on the question of democratic accountability and legitimacy in the European Union.
The economic and financial crisis has contributed to a wider crisis in confidence in the institutions that have been so painstakingly built in Europe over the past fifty years and of which Ireland has been an integral part for the past four decades.

We need to confront this crisis of confidence with a sense of urgency and with determination, and a clear understanding of what is at stake.

The immediate context of this discussion is the new framework of economic governance that has been developed in response to the crisis and to protect our common currency.

The European Semester - the EU's new system of economic and budgetary coordination - is already in its third year.

Under the Irish Presidency agreement has most recently been reached on the so-called ‘Two Pack’ of measures to strengthen budgetary coordination and surveillance in the euro area.

These measures do raise questions regarding the accountability of the new system and national parliaments ought to consider how these measures can be brought within their existing budgetary functions.

This was clearly recognised by Herman Van Rompuy in his report on Economic and Monetary Union published last December when he pointed out that “budgetary decisions are at the heart of Member States’ parliamentary democracies.”

The European Council has repeatedly underlined the need to address the issue, most recently in March when it stressed that “any new steps towards strengthening economic governance will need to be accompanied by further steps towards stronger legitimacy and accountability.”

I, like many of my colleagues throughout Europe, fundamentally believe that we need to have an open and frank discussion on this issue. This is why I devoted the
informal meeting of European Affairs Ministers I hosted in January here in Dublin to a consideration of the topic.

I was pleased that we were also joined also by representatives of the European Parliament and of the Oireachtas, including your Chairman.

I had asked Professor Brigid Laffan to prepare a paper to guide our discussion. This set out many of the key questions which we need to address and I recommend it to you, if you have not seen it. It is still available on the Irish Presidency website. I was impressed by the thoughtfulness with which my colleagues discussed the topic.

There was a clear consensus on the need to address any democratic deficit with distinct roles envisaged for national parliaments and the European Parliament.

It was also clear that they had very little desire for further institutional or treaty change but could see steps that could be taken within the existing framework.

Many colleagues felt that simple improvements in informing and consulting national parliaments about developments at the European level would yield immediate results, as would new forms of cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament.

I also very much welcome the work that is being done by this Committee and, in particular, by your Chairman.

I know that he and a group of his European colleagues have been actively engaged in considering ways to improve coordination between national parliaments, strengthening dialogue with the Commission and developing a system for consulting national parliaments on the Semester process.

The democratic legitimacy of the Semester process was also considered last month by the Speakers of EU Parliaments who were meeting in Nicosia.
They looked specifically at the provision contained in the Stability Treaty for a conference of representatives of the European Parliament and of national Parliaments to discuss budgetary policy.

Stressing the necessity for democratic legitimacy and accountability in the economic governance of the EU, they proposed the establishment of an interparliamentary Conference with representatives from national parliaments and from the European Parliament.

This Conference would meet twice yearly, once in Brussels and once in the Member State holding the Presidency.

This would meet for the first time under the Lithuanian Presidency and then at the beginning of 2014 at the European Parliament.

The conclusion I draw from the various strands of activity, whether at governmental or parliamentary level, is that there is a very clear sense of the need to strengthen democratic accountability and legitimacy across the board.

This is even more pronounced as we take further steps towards closer economic and monetary integration, with the greater sharing of sovereignty which this implies.

I believe that there is widespread political will to address this and the various contributions that have been made from all parties have been offered in a constructive and open spirit.

However, it would naive to deny that we face a deeper and more intractable problem of democratic accountability and legitimacy.

Many people in Europe today do not feel that the European institutions are accountable. They are perceived to be remote, opaque and out of touch with everyday concerns.
There is very little public understanding of how Europe works or the complexities of the decision-making process.

Many of you will have seen, I am sure, a recent Eurobarometer survey carried out in the six largest Member States which suggests a widespread collapse in trust in the European Union. This is deeply worrying.

Of course, in part this reflects the unpopularity of the measures which had to be taken to address the crisis and the weaknesses in economic governance in Europe that were, in part, to blame for the crisis in the first place.

No doubt, as we emerge from the crisis and economic conditions in Europe improve, so too will the reputation of the European institutions.

I still believe, however, that we cannot be complacent and we have to confront head-on the type of ill-informed euroscepticism that is all too evident today.

We have to make the case for Europe and remind people of how the European Union has brought unprecedented peace and prosperity to this continent.

I believe educating people about how Europe works is important and for this reason I started the Blue Star programme in schools to encourage awareness among a new generation of the benefits that EU membership brings us. The response by pupils, teachers and parents has been really impressive.

As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to monitor the decisions which are taken at EU level and precisely for this reason this Government supported the introduction of new arrangements for the scrutiny of EU business.

I very much welcome the decision by the Oireachtas to publish an annual scrutiny work programme. This is an important and valuable innovation.

We also have the opportunity this year, the European Year of Citizens, to recall and celebrate the rights we all enjoy as EU citizens.
Be this the right to live and work in other Member States, the range of social and economic rights that the EU has developed, or the right to vote in European elections.

Next year we will have European elections and this will be a litmus test for the legitimacy of the European Parliament.

With the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament now enjoys equal legislative powers with the Council on most matters. It will be important that we encourage a real debate in the run-up to the elections and a high turn-out on the day.

I am also convinced that if the European Union can deliver the right policies, it will regain the trust and public confidence it has enjoyed in the past.

That is why we are working hard now on delivering our Presidency programme with its clear focus on stability, jobs and growth.

We have prioritised those areas which we believe will provide the best sources of employment and growth in the future, in particular through measures to improve and complete the Single Market and to develop new trading opportunities for our exporters.

We are also working hard to agree the budgetary framework for the European Union which will underpin policies, such as Cohesion and the CAP, which will continue to support living standards and jobs in Europe up till 2020.

At this critical moment, Europe must be seen to be delivering the solutions we need rather than being perceived as part of the problem.

I am very happy to answer your questions.

Thank you